

# The Authority of the Old Testament



**Dallas Burdette January 15, 1999**

**Thrust statement:** The Old Testament reveals the will of God for ethical behavior.

**Scripture Reading:** [Matthew 5:17-19](#); [2 Timothy 2:15](#)

What relevance does the Old Testament have within the Christian community? Is the Old Testament an antiquated book that is no longer relevant to Christians? Is it necessary for believers to study the Old Testament, as did the early church? Did the American Restoration Movement initiated by the Campbells reject the Old Testament? If so, when? What is your attitude toward the Old Testament? The most crucial question one must consider in seeking a proper decision to this interrogation is: "What did the men who wrote the New Testament think about the Old Testament?"

## ALEXANDER CAMPBELL

The question among evangelicals is not whether or not the Old Testament is inspired, but does the Old Testament have any significance for believers today? Before considering the attitudes of the apostles and other inspired men, how do we account for such a wholesale abandonment of the Old Testament within the Churches of Christ? Perhaps, a brief note of Alexander Campbell's beliefs on this subject will help to set the tone for our discussion. For example, the attitudes of those in the Stone/Campbell Movement were influenced by a sermon preached by Alexander Campbell on the law. It is this sermon that set the stage for the negative attitude within many Churches of Christ. Everett Ferguson commented upon the significance of this sermon in an address to the Christian Conference, Abilene University, July 1982:

Alexander Campbell's "Sermon on the Law" has been generally regarded by the historians

as a significant episode in the emergence of the Restoration Movement.[\[1\]](#)

Even Campbell credited this sermon to the beginning of the American Restoration Movement. As a result of this message on the law, the Campbell Restoration Movement was launched. He attributed an eminent significance for his own participation in the Movement to this sermon. The following extract from Campbell may explain the significance of this speech:

Although precisely thirty years this month since I delivered it, and some two or three years after my union with the Baptist denomination, the intelligent reader will discover in it the elements of things which have characterized all our writings on the subject of modern Christianity from that day to the present. . . . This unfortunate sermon afterward involved me in a seven years' war with some members of said Association, and became a matter of much debate. I found at least, however, that there was a principle at work in the plotters of said crusade, which Stephen assigns as the cause of the misfortunes of Joseph. It is, therefore, highly probable to my mind, that but for the persecution begun on the alleged heresy of this sermon, whether the present reformation had ever been advocated by me.[\[2\]](#)

Campbell stressed that he did not recognize the division of the law into the three classifications, that is, (1) moral, (2) ceremonial, and (3) judicial. Since he did not recognize these three categorizations, he drew a sharp distinction between the so-called old and new covenants, that is to say, a distinction between the Old Testament books and the New Testament books. Alexander was not alone in this decision. His father also stressed this difference in 1809 in his ***Declaration and Address***. Thomas Campbell uses the following pregnant words to express this distinction:

That although the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are inseparably connected, making together but one perfect and entire revelation of the Divine will, for the edification and salvation of the Church, and therefore in that respect cannot be separated; yet as to what directly and properly belongs to their immediate object, the new Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament Church, and the particular duties of its members.[\[3\]](#)

As a result of their philosophy, they set the tone for the neglect of the Old Testament books. It appears that this neglect for the Old Testament, at least in the Stone/Campbell Restoration Movement, may be due in part to the "Sermon on the Law" and the ***Declaration and Address***. Thus, as a result of this emphasis, this concept became a focal point in the theology of the Movement. Part of their theology rests, so it seems, in not properly understanding the negative statements in the writings of Paul that grew out of the "new covenant" that God created through His Son Jesus Christ. Ferguson also expresses the central focus of Campbell's position on the law in his use of Romans and Galatians:

Campbell in the "Sermon on the Law" works only with Paul, primarily Romans (from which he took his text) and secondarily Galatians and 2 Corinthians. He could have appealed also to Hebrews. One must remember that Paul had a special problem in mind, namely, Judaizers who were binding parts of the law of Moses on Gentile Christians as conditions of salvation, and, in applying Paul's teaching, this context must be kept in mind.

[\[4\]](#)

It appears that Alexander Campbell did not consider the negative aspects of the law in light of the

Jewish controversy. How is one to interpret disapproving announcements about the law? Does opposing testimony about the law disannul the validity of the law for believers? Was Campbell correct in asserting that there is no distinction among the three classifications of the law, namely, ceremonial, moral, and civil? Did Campbell examine carefully the positive statements about the law in the Gospel of Matthew? Some of Campbell's arguments are sufficiently fragile that one is reluctant to let too much rest upon them. Ferguson is perfectly right when he writes, "Campbell does not in the Sermon deal with the rather different estimate of the law to be found in Matthew."[\[5\]](#)

## NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

Christians are confronted with two issues concerning the relevance of the Old Testament: (1) Does the Old Testament have authority for Christians? and (2) How does one apply the Old Testament to the Christian community? The most common understanding about the Old Testament is that Christ nailed it to the cross. In other words, He annulled or abrogated the law—period. Thus, many saints do not read the Old Testament writings. Many Christians have adopted the position of Adolf Harnack (1851-1930):

To reject the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake the church rightly resisted; to retain it in the sixteenth century was a fate from which the Reformation could not escape; but still to preserve it in the nineteenth century as one of the canonical documents of Protestantism is the result of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis.[\[6\]](#)

Harnack's solution was summarily to reject the Old Testament. Even though Christians would not express their disapprobation of the Old Testament with his phraseology, nevertheless, it amounts to practically the same view. But these views were not unique with Harnack. In fact, in the second century, Marcion (c. 160) also rejected entirely the Old Testament from his Bible.[\[7\]](#) Marcion concluded that the God of the Old Testament could not be the God of the New.

One finds difficulty in squaring Marcion's view with the facts. For instance, over three-fourths of the total Bible is found in the Old Testament. This point alone is sufficient ground to cause one to pause before rejecting this most extensive record of God's revelation. Everett Ferguson aptly remarks:

According to one count, there are 239 acknowledged quotations of the OT, introduced by some kind of formula, in the NT; there are 198 quotations not introduced by any formula; there are 1,167 instances of OT passages reworded or directly mentioned. This makes a total of 1,604 NT citations of 1,276 different OT passages. There are many allusions to the OT and borrowings of its phrases. Most of these passages represent a straightforward, literary use of the OT. The NT uses the old in many ways; for vocabulary and phraseology to express its own ideas, for illustration, for proof of its statements, for moral instruction, for predictions of the new situation. Each of these and other uses could be discussed, but suffice it to say that problems in the NT use of the Old should not obscure the tremendous indebtedness of the later canon to the older, nor should they make that entire usage more problematic than it is.[\[8\]](#)

Beginning with the New Testament, the permanent value of the Old Testament is repeatedly affirmed with explicit statements about its importance. For example, consider the words of Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the

smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (**Matthew 5:17-20**).

Again, Paul sets forth the validity of the Old Testament in his epistle to the Romans:

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (**Romans 15:4**).

Once more, Paul zeros in on the legitimacy of the Old Testament in his letter to the Corinthians:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (**1 Corinthians 10:11**).

Or, consider Paul's admonition to Timothy:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (**2 Timothy 3:14-17**).

These Scripture citations are passages that many Christians have not come to grips with. What does it mean to say, "whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (**Matthew 5:19**)? How can the sacred writings be useful "for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (**1 Timothy 3:16**)? How can Jesus and Paul say these things if the Old Testament is no longer relevant? Again, it is significant that when Paul wrote these words to Timothy, he had reference to the Old Testament. What did Paul mean when he encouraged Timothy to "continue in what you have learned" (**2 Timothy 3:14**)? The inclusion or exclusion of the Old Testament affects every area of theology.

The author of Hebrews specifically wrote that the unity of the Old Testament and the New Testament were to be found in the same God, despite the later arguments of Marcion:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe (**Hebrews 1:1-2**).

Believers during the Old Testament and New Testament eras shared the one and only God.

### **MORAL, CEREMONIAL, CIVIL**

Part of the problem, so it seems to me, is a failure to consider the various aspects of the law. This distinction is not generally advocated within the Churches of Christ. Why is this so? An answer to the problem lies partly in Alexander Campbell's position. Campbell did not make a distinction between the

various aspects of the law. But was he correct? Are the arguments for moral, ceremonial, or civil legitimate? Walter Kaiser very succinctly states this problem:

It must be conceded that the OT contains parts that were indeed temporary and, therefore, time-bound by their very nature (e.g., the ceremonial and ritualistic laws and the once-for-all aspects of its historic episodes). But our contention is that there was also built-in warning with each of these temporary parts that alerted us to the fact that they would become obsolete. Accordingly, all the tabernacle instructions were given as a model, or "pattern" (Exod 25:9, 40; Heb 8:5), of the real, which remained separate from the ceremonial institutions themselves. Nevertheless, behind the temporal and historical lay a principle—a truth meant to outlive its temporal or historical illustration. Too frequently the church has incorrectly assumed that when it had seen the collapse of the temporal institution, it had also thereby witnessed the end of all truth or obligation to any undergirding principles that the institution or historical event illustrated for a former age.[\[9\]](#)

Perusals of the Old Testament Scriptures indicate the temporal nature of certain aspects, but, on the other hand, it is obvious that certain elements have abiding validity. The Scriptures must give its own signals in distinguishing what is temporal, cultural, and historically conditioned. Is the moral law of God temporal, cultural, or historically conditioned? How does one explain the many references in the New Testament to the Old Testament that speaks of the abiding force of the law? How does one account for the eternal righteousness of the law in the messianic age? For example, both Jeremiah and Isaiah speak of the abiding importance of the law in the Christian age. If this is not the situation, then one wonders what Isaiah and Jeremiah refer to when they spoke of "the law" going forth from Jerusalem and "the law" being written upon the heart? Isaiah tells Israel that

In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established  
as chief among the mountains;  
it will be raised above the hills,  
and all nations will stream to it.  
Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob.  
He will teach us his ways,  
so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,  
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem ([Isaiah 2:2-3](#)).

Again, Jeremiah also speaks of the law written on the hearts of God's people in the messianic age:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD,  
"when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah.  
It will not be like the covenant  
I made with their forefathers

when I took them by the hand  
to lead them out of Egypt,  
because they broke my covenant,  
though I was a husband to them,"  
declares the LORD.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel  
after that time," declares the LORD.

**"I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.**

I will be their God,  
and they will be my people (**Jeremiah 31:31-33**).

Both of these citations are Messianic in tone. How does one reconcile these Scriptures with the current interpretation that the "law was nailed to the cross"? Is it possible that Christians have misread the statements of Paul in his letters to the Ephesians (**2:15-16**) and Colossians (**2:13-15**), which seem to indicate, at least on surface reading, that the law was nailed to the cross?

<b>Ephesians 2:15-16</b>	<b>Colossians 2:13-15</b>
For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh <b>the law with its commandments and regulations</b> . His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.	When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, <b>the law with its commandments and regulations</b> , that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

What does Paul teach by saying, "the law with its commandments and regulations"? What does Paul mean by announcing, "the law with its commandments and regulations" to the Colossians? One must be careful not to bring his theological heritage, his ecclesiastical traditions, his cultural norms, or his existential concerns to the Epistles as he or she reads them. If one's interpretation of these two Scripture citations make the text mean something God did not intend, then one is abusing the texts. Remember that the text serves as a window through which one can glance into a historical period. The following extract from Greg Bahnsen may explain these two Scripture citations (**Ephesians 2:15-16** and **Colossians 2:13-15**) more clearly:

The ceremonial observations no longer apply, but their meaning and intention have been eternally validated. The earlier sacrificial ritual was a foreshadow pointing to Christ (Heb. 10:1), and no repetition of a mere shadow can amount to the substantial reality! That which is the foundation of the new economy, in which the outward performance of the ceremonial ritual is not observed, is the obedience of Christ (cf. Heb. 10:8 f.). His obedience makes it no longer necessary for us to obey the ceremonial law in the way which the saints living in the period of expectation did. Ephesians 2:14-16 says that Christ has put the principle of commandments contained in ordinances "out of gear." Christ has broken down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles of which the dividing wall in the temple was the symbol. It

should be quite clear that the law which represents enmity and separation between Jews and Gentiles is the ceremonial law, for the moral law does not distinguish between these groups (all men are responsible to the moral law and are condemned under it: Rom. 1-3). It is this ceremonial system which Christ has made ineffective.[\[10\]](#)

In seeking to draw attention to neglected truths, repetition is unavoidable. It is a popular error to suppose that "commandments contained in ordinances" refers to the law as a whole. But it seems that the stipulations that Paul addresses has to do with "the law of commandments contained in ordinances," that is to say, the principle, order, policy, or system of commandments, not the moral law of God. In other words, the "commandments contained in ordinances" are "decrees," thus, referring to the ceremonial law. Even in [Colossians 2:14](#), the "ordinances" are the "shadow of things to come" ([2:17](#)), and in [verses 11 and 16](#) specific ceremonial illustrations are given.

### SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Sermon on the Mount is quoted by many Christians to substantiate the abandonment of the Old Testament. Part of the confusion lies within the phrases, "**You have heard that it was said to the people long ago**" ([Matthew 5:21](#)) and "**But I tell you**" ([Matthew 5:22](#)). The Greek text is:  $\eta\kappa\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\alpha\tau\epsilon\ \omicron\{\tau\iota\ \epsilon\jmath\rho\rho\epsilon\nu\eta\ \tau\omicron\iota\ \alpha\jmath\rho\alpha\iota\nu\omicron\iota\}$ :[\[11\]](#) ("You heard that it was said to the ancients") [[Mathew 5:21](#)], and  $\epsilon\jmath\gamma\omega\ \delta\epsilon\ \lambda\epsilon\gamma\omega\ \upsilon\mu\iota\ \nu\omicron\iota$ [\[12\]](#) ("But I say to you") [[Matthew 5:22](#)]. The phrase, "You heard that it was said to the ancients" is not what the law said, but rather, the interpretations placed upon the law by its religious leaders. Jesus sought to correct the erroneous explanations piled upon the law through the tradition of the elders; He did this by calling attention with the phrase, "But I say to you."

To illustrate the above statement, a cursory look into Jesus' temptation by Satan should clarify the distinction. For example, in the preceding chapter ([Matthew 4](#)), Jesus' confrontation with Satan resulted in His quoting the Old Testament. Observe that Jesus, in His response to Satan, did not say, "You heard that it was said to the ancients," but rather, "**It is written**" ( $\gamma\epsilon\nu\gamma\rho\alpha\pi\tau\alpha\iota$ ) [[Matthew 4:4](#)]. On the one hand, the first statement ([Matthew 5:21](#)) refers to the forefathers, but, on the other hand, the second statement ([Matthew 4:4](#)) refers to the *written revelation* of God through the prophets.

One must learn to reevaluate and reinterpret what has been handed down from generation to generation. Above all, never make a decision on what you would like the passage to say. Seek to be faithful to the way in which the Holy Spirit structured the original text. Only through a careful reading of the text itself can one understand the original meaning of the text without reading into it one's own ideas drawn from the present. Proof-texting has no place in exegesis. Verses are only a part of a larger context. The Scriptures in Ephesians and Colossians must be interpreted in light of the larger context, that is, the whole of God's revelation. For example, the preceding Scriptures must be interpreted in light of the Sermon on the Mount.

A brief analysis of certain aspects of the Sermon on the Mount will help to shed light on Jesus' viewpoint concerning the validity or worthlessness of the law. Did Jesus uphold the law or repudiate the law? Did Jesus abolish the Law of Moses and give another law that is more demanding than Moses' law? What can one learn from the Sermon on the Mount concerning Jesus' position toward the law? Does this Sermon invalidate the law?

As one approaches the Sermon on the Mount, one must decide, based upon the context, whether or not Jesus gave a new law or simply explained the original intent of His law as it was revealed to Moses. A

lot will depend upon the application that one attaches to the words, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago," and "But I tell you." Was there a contrast between Moses and Jesus' teaching? Perhaps John R. W. Stott cogently expresses this best:

It is widely supposed that Jesus was now inaugurating a new law, and that in doing so he was contradicting and repudiating the old. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, the suggestion that he should do this is antecedently so improbable as to be impossible. Not only would this run counter to His lifelong attitude of reverent assent to Scripture, but He had just asserted that he had not 'come to abolish the law and the prophets . . . but to fulfill them' (v. 17). . . . No. What Jesus was contradicting here was not Scripture but tradition, not what 'is written' but what 'was said,' not God's word but the false interpretations of it of which the scribes and Pharisees were guilty.[13]

Christ was evaluating not the Older Testamental law, but rather the pharisaical interpretations placed upon the law. Jesus affirmed the solemn authority that not even the least commandment of the entire Old Testament was to be taught as without binding validity today:

Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

Surely, after such a strong declaration, Jesus would not immediately proceed to loosen a commandment of God's law with "You heard," but "I say" (Matthew 5:21-48). For Jesus, "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Accordingly, Jesus reaffirmed elements of the Decalogue in His response to the rich young man: "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:18-19).

Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, speaks of the abiding validity of the law: "Do not think that I have come to abolish (katalu`sai) the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). Did Jesus give us a New Torah, as suggested by many, and abolish the Old? Is it possible that an individual's prejudice is so deep-seated that one-sidedness negates the possibility of understanding this text? One seldom ask what this text means; rather, one wants to know how to answer his opponent. Have Christians, in general, approached the Bible to prove what they already believe rather than observe what it teaches? These are questions that everyone must consider in order to be honest with himself or herself.

### Not to abolish but to fulfill

Another stumbling block to many believers is the infinitive phrase, "to fulfill" (plhrw`sai). This group of words is an enigma to many believers. Just what is meant by the infinitive utterance, "to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17)? Also, how should one interpret Christ's statement: "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (gevnhtai, "might become") [Matthew 5:18]. The NIV uses "fulfilled" (plhrw`sai) in verse 17, but "accomplished" (gevnhtai) in verse 18. On the other hand, the KJV employs "fulfilled" in both verses, but is the meaning the same?

Matthew uses two different Greek words for our English word "fulfill" in the KJV. The current interpretation attached to the word "fulfill" is generally understood in the sense of "relaxation" or "invalidation." But is this interpretation correct? Greg Bahnsen seems to have shown conclusively that

the Greek words convey distinct meanings:

The explicit and emphatic affirmation of the law's authority does not allow one to take "fulfillment" in verse 17 as any sort of euphemism for "relaxation" or "invalidation." At the same time in which God promised a new covenant He indicated that, far from being different from the first covenant, the ethical stipulations of that new covenant would be the same as the original law; God says he will write the law on His people's hearts, not change the law.[\[14\]](#)

Jesus says He came to "fulfill" (plhrw`sai), not "to abolish" (katalu`sai). Failure to distinguish between the two words ("fulfill" and "accomplish") employed by the Holy Spirit can lead to an erroneous understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. Ignorance of these words can lend an air of plausibility to one's interpretation. Just what does this aorist infinitive mean ("to fulfill," plhrw`sai)? For example, does it indicate that Jesus put an end to,[\[15\]](#) replaces[\[16\]](#), supplements,[\[17\]](#) to actively obey, [\[18\]](#) or enforcing or confirming?[\[19\]](#) The most detailed study of this infinitive phrase is that of Bahnsen. He draws attention to this ("enforcing," or "confirming") neglected aspect of "to fulfill":

The establishment of God's will as the work of Christ plays an important part in Matthew's Christology; accordingly, Matthew Henry writes that the gospel is not the repeal of the law, but its reestablishment. Jesus says in Matthew 5:17 that he came to confirm and restore the full measure, intent, and purpose of the Older Testament law. He sees the process of revelation deposited in the Older Testament as finding its validation in Him—its actual embodiment (cf. John 1:17). Jesus' own teaching represents a proclamation of the full implications of the commandments God delivered in the Older Testament in opposition to the legalistic scribal interpretations; His teaching demonstrates that God's law is more exacting and comprehensive than the current shallow and externalistic interpretations would lead people to think. *Pleerloo* should be taken to mean "confirm and restore in full measure." We must not think that the coming of Christ has invalidated the previous law of God, for the "word of the Lord abides forever" (1 Pet. 1:24-25).[\[20\]](#)

One's understanding of the Sermon on the mount plays a central role in one's application of the Old Testament to the Christian era. What is the central focus of Jesus in His Sermon? Is He propounding a "new law," or is He refuting the traditions of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (scribes)? The context seems to indicate that Jesus addresses the nullifying attitude of the religious leaders toward the law, not the law itself. In other words, the leaders of Israel were making the Word of God ineffective through their traditions. In this Sermon, Jesus makes it clear that the model for Christian obedience to God's law is not Pharisaical legalism, but obedience from the heart.[\[21\]](#)

The religious leaders' behavior excludes one from the kingdom of heaven: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (**Matthew 5:20**). To illustrate the forcefulness of Jesus' teaching about *inward* righteousness versus *outward* righteousness, it will be helpful to reflect upon Jeremiah's graphic portrait of Israel's reliance upon the "temple of the Lord" in contradistinction to proper conduct, which behavior Jesus also addresses in His Sermon on the Mount.

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the

alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD ([Jeremiah 7:3-11](#)).

This same attitude toward God's law is also reflected in the writings of Isaiah. Listen to God as He addresses the leaders in Israel for their lack of concern for the things that really matter:

'Why have we fasted,' they say,  
'and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?'  
"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.

<sup>4</sup> Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.  
You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

<sup>5</sup> Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for a man to humble himself?  
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed  
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?  
Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?

<sup>6</sup> **"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:**  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe him,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ([Isaiah 58:3-7](#)).

Many of the religious leaders, in Jesus' day, reflected the same mind-set that existed in Israel. Their religion consisted in *outward* rituals, but not with *inward* righteousness. The words of Isaiah are very similar to the words of Jesus in His renunciation of the religious leaders in His judgment scene ([Matthew 23:1-46](#)). This parable of Jesus is an analysis of those condemned in [Matthew 23](#) (seven woes against the leaders of Israel). In the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus concludes the true interpretation of God's law against the traditions of men, He warns His disciples with very vivid language about the ethical behavior of the teachers of the law and Pharisees:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from

thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (**Matthew 7:15-21**).

Why must one practice *inward* as well as *outward* righteousness and teach the details of God's law? Is it not because one's righteousness (good works) must include the whole man? Jesus says, "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind**" (**Matthew 22:37**). In other words, the righteousness of the believer must exceed the *external* righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. What is Jesus' concern? Is it not about law abuse? Is it not about neglect of the true intent of the law? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes to the very heart of the matter. In other words, Jesus repudiates the perverse externalistic interpretations of the Pharisees and their exegetical distortions of the law. Not only were the Pharisees mistaken in this area of the law, but they were also incorrect in their scheme of justification; the religious leaders sought salvation through works. To state more clearly, the religious leaders not only invalidated the intent of the law by their disregard for the inward, but they also used the law as their means of right standing before God.

The Sermon on the Mount zeroes in on the *external* versus the *internal* intent of the law. For example, this famous Sermon is rounded off, as stated above, with an earnest appeal to beware of false prophets and a petition to put into practice His teachings. The first truth that our Lord Jesus Christ drives home in this Sermon is the authority of the Old Testament (**Matthew 5:17-19**). Again, in concluding this Sermon, Jesus sums up the essence of the Law with what is now commonly called the "Golden Rule": "**So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets**" (**Matthew 7:12**).

### PAUL'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE LAW

As one contemplates the writings of Paul, one should be conscious that the Holy Spirit used Paul as an instrument to communicate His truths. There can be no contradiction between Paul and other statements of Holy Scripture. It appears, at least on surface reading, that Paul's negative statements about law depreciate its authority in the life of the believer. For many believers, Paul's diversified "point of view" toward the law is one of the most baffling enigmas in biblical studies. At the very center of this problem is a statement of Paul to Christians in Rome: "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (**Romans 10:4**). How does one harmonize this statement of Paul with the statement of Jesus in His Sermon (**Matthew 5:17-19**)? Heikki Raisanen captures this dichotomy of Paul's theology this way:

Paul has two sets of statements concerning the validity of the law for Christians. According to one set the law has been abrogated once and for all. According to the other the law is still in force, and what it requires is charismatically fulfilled by Christians.<sup>[22]</sup>

Paul's objection to the law must be seen in its illegal use, that is to say, the use of the law as a means of justification, not in its proper use, that is to say, the law as an expression of God's will for humanity. For Paul, the law is always explicitly the "law of God." Thus, Paul could express his delight in the law: "For in my inner being I delight in God's law" (**Romans 7:22**). Again, Paul expresses his abiding status to

the law in its relationship to his way of life: "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin" (**Romans 7:25**). The one who does not submit himself or herself to God's law is hostile to God: "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (**Romans 8:7**). Again, Paul speaks of the abiding validity of the law as the thing that really counts: "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (**1 Corinthians 7:19**). From these Scriptures, once can see at a glance that Paul delights in God's law, serves the law of God in his mind, and subjects himself to the law of God.

One writer explains one's subjection to the law in these terms: "The nature of the Law is summed up in the statement that the Law is the good will of God. Hence not to be subject to the Law is enmity against God, R. 8:7."<sup>[23]</sup> Also, Paul's comments to the Corinthians is quite revealing: "To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law" (**1 Corinthians 9:21**). Is one "under law"? Or is one "subject to law"? If one is under law, then, one is still under condemnation. But what did Paul mean by his statement in **1 Corinthians 9:21**? In **verse 20** of this same chapter, Paul stresses that the Christian is not under law, but in **verse 21**, Paul appears to contradict what he had just stated. How does one respond properly to this apparent contradiction between the two verses? Perhaps, a parallel chart from the English and Greek text will clarify part of the dilemma:

<b>1 Corinthians 9:20</b>	<b>1 Corinthians 9:21</b>
To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those <b>under the law</b> I became like one <b>under the law</b> (though I myself <b>am not under the law</b> ), so as to win those <b>under the law</b> .	To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am <b>under Christ's law</b> ), so as to win those not having the law.
kai; ejgenovmhn toi`" jIoudaivoi" wJ" jIoudai`o", i{na jIoudaivou" kerdhvsu: toi`" <b>uJpo; novmon</b> wJ" <b>uJpo; novmon</b> , mh; w]n aujto;" <b>uJpo; novmon</b> , i{na tou;" <b>uJpo; novmon</b> kerdhvsu:	toi`" ajnovmoi" wJ" a[nomo", mh; w]n a[nomo" qeou` ajllÆ <b>e[nnomo"</b> Cristou`, i{na kerdavnw tou;" ajnovmou"

In **1 Corinthians 9:20**, Paul says "under law" (**uJpo; novmon**) four times; on the other hand, in **1 Corinthians 9:21**, Paul does not employ "under law" (**uJpo; novmon**), but rather, "subject to law" (**e[nnomo"**). In the chart above, "under law" is highlighted in both Greek and English text, and, also in **1 Corinthians 9:21**, "under law" is highlighted in both Greek and English text. Paul forcefully states that he is "not under law" (**v. 20**). If this is so, and it is, one wonders why he would say that he was "under Christ's law" in the next verse (**v. 21**). In **verse 21**, Paul does not write "under law" (**uJpo; novmon**), but "subject to Christ's law" (**e[nnomo"**). No Christian is "under law," but every Christian is "subject to law" under Christ or "within law to Christ." Again, Paul says, "I am not free from God's law" (a[nomo" qeou`) but "within law to Christ" (**e[nnomo"** Cristou).<sup>[24]</sup> There is no contradiction between these two verses. Did Paul ever consider himself without law to God?

Paul's negative statements about law concern the use of the law as a means of justification, that is to say, an illegal use of the law. Whenever one resorts to the law (any law for that matter—old or new) to justify one's standing before God, then, one is using the law in a way that God never intended. Paul calls

attention to a righteousness that is from God through faith, not law: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (**Romans 3:21-22**). The religious leaders of Israel were seeking righteousness by law rather than by faith. Thus, Paul nails the coffin shut, as it were, for those who rely upon law as the means of justification: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (**Romans 3:20**). It is in this vein that John Murray explains:

The person who is 'under law' in the sense of Rom. vi. 14 is in bondage to sin in its guilt, defilement, and power. But this was not the consequence of being under the Mosaic economy during the period from Moses to Christ. Nor is 'under law', in this sense, to be confused with a similar term as it applies to a believer in Christ (1 Cor. ix. 21). Of the same force as 'under law', in this depreciatory sense is the expression 'of law' (Rom. iv. 14; Gal. 3.18, iii.16, iii. 2,5,10) refers to the same notion. 'apart from works of law' (Rom. iii.21), he means a righteousness apart from works of law and therefore antithetical to a works-righteousness. When he says that we have been put to death to the law and discharged from the law (Rom. vii.4, 6), he refers to the breaking of that bond that binds us to the law as the way of acceptance with God (cf. Also Gal. ii.9). Law as law, as commandment requiring obedience and pronouncing its curse upon all transgression, does not have any potency or provision for the justification of the ungodly. The contrast between law-righteousness, which is our own righteousness, and the righteousness of God provided in Christ is the contrast between human merit and the gospel of grace (cf. Rom. X.3; Gal. ii.21, v. 4; Phil. iii.9). Paul's polemic in the epistles to the Romans and Galatians is concerned with that antithesis.[\[25\]](#)

Even though justification is by faith in Jesus, nevertheless, Paul submits the following question to cause reflection upon the law's relevancy in the life of every believer: "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (**Romans 3:31**). The written law is an expression of God's righteousness. Again, Paul reinforces this truth when he writes: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law" (**Romans 13:8**). In other words, Paul is saying that love expresses itself in obedience to the commandments. Immediately upon his explanation that love is the fulfillment of the law, he pens:

The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (**Romans 13:9-10**).

### **JAMES' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE LAW**

Just a perusal of the book of James reveals the relevancy of the law in one's life. No New Testament writer is more zealous for the fruits that accompany faith than James, our Lord's brother. In fact, James speaks of the law as "the perfect law that gives freedom" (**James 1:25**). According to James, every believer who continues to look "intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does" (**James 1:25**). Not only does James call the law "the perfect law," but he also speaks of it as the "royal law" (**James 2:8**). Is James talking about the law itself? Listen to James as he explains his "royal law":

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker (**James 2:8-11**).

Again, James calls attention to the teaching that the law also judges one's relationship to his brother: "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it (**James 4:11**). Why such reliance upon the law? Does James' dependence upon the law reflect the words of Jesus—his Lord and brother in the flesh (**Matthew 5:17-20**)? Again, why such admonitions? Is it not that the believer is to be holy in his or her manner of life? The law reflects the character of God. It is for this reason that Paul writes, "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (**Romans 7:12**).

### **PETER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE LAW**

Peter also echoes upon the character of God in the Old Testament and appeals to the Old Testament writings for right behavior: "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written (gevgraptai): "Be holy, because I am holy" (**1 Peter 1:15-16**). This citation is taken from **Leviticus**: "The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy (**19:2**). It is also significant that the Hebrew writer concludes his epistle with a reference to the Old Testament:

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (**Hebrews 13:4-6**).

This writer (Hebrews) cites two Old Testament passages (**Joshua 1:5** and **Psalms 118:6**) to illustrate the presence and help of God. Every Christian must be free from the love of money and be content with what he or she has. The believer needs nothing more because he or she always has the presence and help of God. Consider the following chart of the above two Scriptures:

<b>Joshua 1:5</b>	<b>Psalms 118:6</b>
No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.	The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid.  What can man do to me?

### **JOHN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE LAW**

For one to be relieved of the demands of the law would contradict one's relationship to God, which grace establishes. Salvation is freedom from sin, not freedom to commit sin. The Christian has respect and love for God's law. He is now a servant of righteousness; he is no longer a servant of sin; he is

concerned about God's law. John puts it this way: "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness" (**1 John 3:4**). Again, John goes right to the heart of commandment keeping:

The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did (**1 John 2:4-6**).

## CONCLUSION

The principle concern of this essay is to set forth a brief summary of the various views advocated toward the relevancy of the Old Testament. Many scholars deny the law any significance since we are under grace, not under law. On the other hand, one finds an equal number of scholars who appeal to the Old Testament as authoritative. Generally, the negative arguments are based upon negative statements of Paul—statements not viewed in context. It appears that expositors who repudiate the Old Testament fail to understand the emphasis of Paul in refuting the Judaizers' use of the Law as a means of right standing before God. One must never use the law as a means of justification. On the other hand, one should employ the law to assist him or her in progressive sanctification, that is to say, holiness in one's walk with God. A perusal of the teachings of Jesus, Paul, James, Peter, and John advance the weight of the Old Testament for the believer.

Again, in conclusion, it is worthy of note to call attention to the negative statements about the law in the Pauline epistles. Paul's negative statements do not relate to the authority of the Old Testament, but rather, to justification. Man, says Paul, cannot be justified by law:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (**Romans 3:19-26**).

God is the one who justifies; law can never justify. The law shuts every man's mouth: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (**Romans 3:19-20**). When one is in Jesus Messiah, then one can say with assurance: "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies" (**Romans 8:33**). Paul reinforces this thought with the statement: "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (**Romans 10:4**). Christians are dead to the law, but the law is not dead. Even though Paul painted a rather dismal picture of those under law, nevertheless, he spoke of a righteousness that is by faith, not law: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all

who believe" ([Romans 3:21-22](#)). Remember the final words of Paul to Timothy about the Old Testament:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work ([2 Timothy 3:14-17](#)).

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#### ENDNOTES

- [1] Everett Ferguson, "Alexander Campbell's 'Sermon on the Law,' A Historical and Theological Examination," *Restoration Quarterly* 29 (second quarter 1987): 71.
- [2] Alexander Campbell, "Sermon on the Law," *Millennial Harbinger* 3 (September 1846): 493.
- [3] See C. S. Young, *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union* (reprint, Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1985), 109.
- [4] Everett Ferguson, "Alexander Campbell's 'Sermon on the Law': A Historical and Theological Examination," *Restoration Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Second Quarter 1987): 83.
- [5] Ibid., 83.
- [6] Adolf Harnack, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 10, quoted in Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Rediscovering The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 14.
- [7] Marcion's views are gleaned from Tertullian's five-book refutation, *Against Marcion*--written during the early part of the third century.
- [8] Everett Ferguson, "Christian Use of the Old Testament," in *The World and Literature of the Old Testament*, ed. John T. Willis (Austin: Sweet Publishing Co., 1979), 373.
- [9] Walter Kaiser, *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 24-25.
- [10] Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (New Jersey: Presbyterian Publishing Co., 1984), 209-10.
- [11] Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, *The Greek New Testament*, (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart) 1983.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] John R. W. Stott, *Christ the Controversialist* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 148.
- [14] Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 46.
- [15] Robert A. Hawkins, "Covenant Relations of the Sermon on the Mount," *Restoration Quarterly* 12 (First Quarter, 1969): 1-9.
- [16] W. D. Davies, *Christian Origins and Judaism* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 56.
- [17] J. Y. Campbell, "Fulfill, Accomplish," in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962), 87-88.
- [18] Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 189-209.
- [19] Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 64.
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] It is in this vein that Paul addresses the believers at Rome: "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted." (Romans 6:17). The KJV renders this verse: "But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you." The Greek text is: uJphkouvsate de; ejk kardiva" ("but you obeyed from the heart" ).
- [22] Heikki Raisanen, "Paul's Theological Difficulties with the Law," in *Studia Biblica, 1978: Papers on Paul and Other New Testament Authors, Sixth International Congress on Biblical Studies*, ed. E. A. Livingston (Sheffield: University Press, 1980), 305, quoted in Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 308.
- [23] Kittel, Gerhard and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), vol. 4, s.v. "The Law in the New Testament," by W. Gutbrod, 1071.

[24] Ibid., 1087-1088.

[25] John Murray, "Law," in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. J. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 722.